







Introduction

The Merced Wild and Scenic River is as central to Yosemite National Park's identity as Half Dome or El Capitan. From its origins high in the Sierra Nevada, the river cuts a breathtaking course through glacial peaks, mountain lakes, alpine and subalpine meadows, waterfalls, and gorges and supports rich and diverse riparian habitat. Early visitors to Yosemite – from writers, artists, and photographers to environmental champions – all heralded the magnificence of the Merced River and its glorious surroundings:

Many a joyful stream is born in the Sierras, but no one can sing like the Merced. In childhood, high on the mountains, her silver thread is a moving melody; of sublime Yosemite she is the voice...

John Muir, 1872

Born in the highest reaches of Yosemite National Park, the headwaters of the main stem and South Fork of the Merced River emerge from Mt. Lyell, Triple Peak, Merced Peak, and Red Peak and descend through the park. These pristine upper reaches represent a watercourse that has shaped the region for eons, either as an incising rush of water or a scouring river of ice. Scientists have long recognized the Merced River as a constant presence through years of geologic change in the Yosemite region.

*Half Dome and
the Merced River
Painting by
Gunnar Widforss,
c. 1920
Courtesy of
Yosemite Concession
Services Corporation*

Today, the upper watershed of the Merced River exists largely as it has for thousands of years. In most areas of Yosemite, it remains a river wild, flowing freely while supporting a diversity of plant and animal species largely unparalleled in the Sierra Nevada. Due to the protection afforded it in a national park, much of the Merced River is free from the direct effects of municipal use, power production, and agriculture. As a result, the Merced River is proving to be a valuable learning ground for scientific research, presenting opportunities for a first-hand education about unique ecological and hydrological river processes.

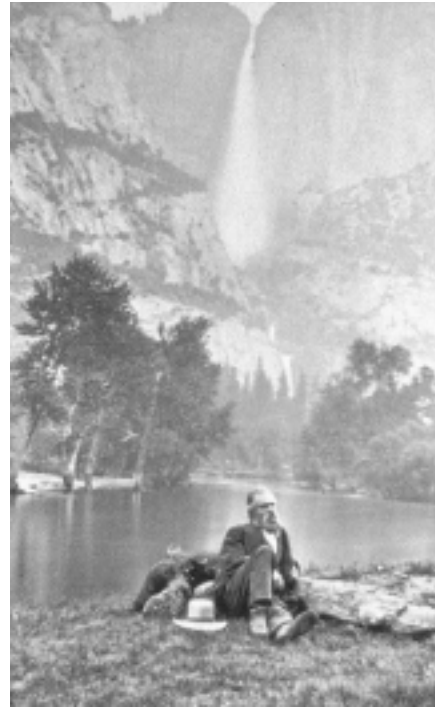
For thousands of years, people have been drawn to the Merced River. American Indian residents of Yosemite Valley – the Yosemite Miwok – called the river *Wah-kal'-mut-tah*. Spanish explorers in the early 1800s gave it the name *El Río de Nuestra Señora de la Merced*. Early Yosemite settlers established villages and businesses near the river. Today, visitors from around the world are drawn to the Merced not only to take in its startling beauty, but to engage in a spectrum of river-related activities. From the river's quiet respite for nature study or photography or picnicking, to favorite sandy beaches and swimming spots, river-related recreational opportunities remain an important part of the Yosemite experience.

However, despite the fact that the Merced River in Yosemite National Park appears to be in a natural condition, it has been altered by humans over time. Its banks have been stabilized to protect roads and other development; bridges span the river, restricting its ability to meander through the Yosemite Valley; and some adjacent wet meadows were once drained or filled for mosquito abatement and to make Yosemite Valley more suitable for grazing, farming, and camping. While there are no major dams on the Merced River in Yosemite National Park, diversions remain, such as an old hydropower diversion dam on the main stem and an impoundment in Wawona for the community's water supply. There are also several dams downstream from the Wild and Scenic portion of the river.

In 1907, Galen Clark, one of Yosemite's first non-Indian settlers, recognized the important role of the river to Yosemite Valley:

Of paramount importance in the care and preservation of Yosemite Valley is the protection of the banks of the Merced River as it runs its winding, crooked course through the length of the valley.

Protection and restoration of the Merced River will help ensure that generations to come can learn from its dynamic natural processes, contributing to a more valuable Yosemite National Park experience well into the future.



*Galen Clark and the Merced River
Photo by George Fiske, c. 1900
Courtesy of Yosemite Museum*

What is a Wild and Scenic River?

In the 1960s, the United States came to recognize that many of the nation's rivers were being dredged, dammed, diverted, and degraded at an alarming rate. In response, Congress established the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in October 1968, which pronounced,

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Congress declares that the established national policy of dam and other construction at appropriate sections of the rivers of the United States needs to be complemented by a policy that would preserve other selected rivers or sections thereof in their free-flowing condition to protect the water quality of such rivers and to fulfill other vital national conservation purposes.

A Wild and Scenic River is one that has been identified as having distinctively unique or “outstandingly remarkable values” that set it apart from all other rivers, making it worthy of special protection. The goal of designating a river as Wild and Scenic is to preserve its free-flowing character and unique qualities.

While a Wild and Scenic designation increases protection for a river, it does not necessarily disallow use or development. Some Wild and Scenic River areas, like the American River in Sacramento, flow through towns or major cities. Uses compatible with the management goals of a particular river are allowed. Development not damaging to the outstanding resources of a designated river, or curtailing its free flow, are usually allowed. In order to outline the permitted levels of use and development, the river manager must prepare a comprehensive management plan. The purpose of a comprehensive management plan, such as the *Merced River Plan*, is to specify the levels of management for protecting and enhancing the river and its immediate environment.

Today, over 11,000 miles of rivers and creeks are protected in the United States under the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Managing agencies include state governments, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. From the Kern and the Klamath in California to the newest additions at Wildhorse and Kiger Creeks in Oregon, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act protects not only the waterway itself, but part of the nation's heritage. Yosemite National Park contains two Wild and Scenic Rivers: the Merced, designated in 1987, and the Tuolumne, designated in 1993.

Wild and Scenic River Designation

In 1987, the U.S. Congress designated the Merced a Wild and Scenic River to protect the river's free-flowing condition and to protect and enhance its unique values for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations (16 USC 1271). This designation gives the Merced River special protection under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and requires the managing agencies to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the river and its immediate environment.

The passage of Public Law 100-149 on November 2, 1987 and Public Law 102-432 on October 23, 1992 placed 122 miles of the main stem and South Fork of the Merced River, including the forks of Red Peak, Merced Peak, Triple Peak, and Lyell, into the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The National Park Service manages 81 miles of the Merced River, encompassing both the main stem and the South Fork in Yosemite National Park and the El Portal Administrative Site. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management administer the remaining 41 miles of the designated river.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

Under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, designated rivers “shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and . . . their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” (16 USC 1271). The following text describes the sections of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act most pertinent to the *Merced River Plan*. (Chapter I of the *Merced River Plan/Final Environmental Impact*

Statement provides a summary of all sections of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The appendices to the *Merced River Plan/FEIS* include the full text of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as it applies to the Merced River, and a legislative history of bills associated with the designation and management of the Merced River.)

Section 1: Congressional declaration of policy and purpose

Section 1 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act includes the congressional declaration of policy and purpose, which explains the intent of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This section states that, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” (16 USC 1271).

Section 2: Classification

Section 2 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires that the river be classified and administered as Wild, Scenic, or Recreational river segments, based on the condition of the river corridor at the time of boundary designation. The classification of a river segment indicates the level of development on the shorelines, the level of development in the watershed, and the accessibility by road or trail. Classifications are defined in the act as follows:

Wild river areas: Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments and generally inaccessible except by trail, with watersheds or shorelines essentially primitive and waters unpolluted.

Scenic river areas: Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.

Recreational river areas: Those rivers or sections of rivers that are readily accessible by road or railroad, that may have some development along their shorelines, and that may have undergone some impoundment or diversion in the past.

The National Park Service developed interim classifications for the Merced Wild and Scenic River in 1989 based on the 1986 eligibility study of the river. These classifications were refined and published in the 1996 *Draft Yosemite Valley Housing Plan*, and once more with the *Merced River Plan/FEIS*.

Section 3: Congressionally designated components, establishment of boundaries, classifications, and management plans

Section 3 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act lists the rivers congressionally designated as components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and requires the administrating agency to identify river corridor boundaries and prepare a comprehensive management plan. The Merced Wild and Scenic River is designated under Section 3(a)(62). Boundaries and classifications are delineated through appropriate revisions to the *General Management Plan*. This section details the span of the river to be administered by the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture and withdraws mining claims to federal lands within one-quarter mile of the riverbank.¹

Section 3(b) requires the agency charged with administration of the Wild and Scenic River to establish boundaries and classifications for the river within one year from the date of designation. Boundaries shall include an average of not more than 320 acres of land per river mile, measured from the ordinary high water mark on both sides of the river.

Section 3 further requires that the federal agency charged with the administration of a Wild and Scenic River component prepare a comprehensive management plan to “provide for the protection of the river values.” It also requires that “the plan shall address resource protection, development of lands and facilities, user capacities, and other management practices necessary or desirable to achieve the purposes of this act.”

¹ For more information on mining claims, see Section 9 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (summarized in Chapter I, page 14 of the *Merced River Plan/FEIS*).

Section 7: Restrictions on hydro and water resources development projects

Section 7 is one of the most vital components of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This provision directs federal agencies to protect the values of designated rivers from the adverse effects of “water resources projects” within the bed and banks of the river.

Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (16 USC 1278) requires a rigorous process to ensure that proposed water resources projects, implemented or assisted by federal agencies within the bed and banks of designated rivers, do not have a “direct and adverse effect” on the values for which the river was designated. Water resources projects include non-Federal Energy Regulation Commission-licensed projects such as dams, water diversions, fisheries habitat and watershed restoration, bridges and other roadway construction/reconstruction, bank stabilization, channelization, levees, boat ramps, and fishing piers that occur within the bed and banks of a designated Wild and Scenic River (IWSRCC 1999) and that affect the river’s free-flowing characteristics. These projects include the types of actions along the Merced Wild and Scenic River that could come up for decision, including those projects for which the purposes are to improve the free-flowing condition of the river.

The agency designated as river manager must complete a Section 7 determination to assess whether the project proposed, assisted, or permitted by a federal agency would directly and adversely affect the values for which the river was designated. Water resources projects that have a direct and adverse effect on the values of a designated river must either be redesigned and resubmitted for a subsequent Section 7 determination, abandoned, or reported to the Secretary of Interior and the United States Congress, in accordance with the act.

Emergency projects (such as repairing a broken sewer line in or near the river) may temporarily proceed without a Section 7 determination. However, a Section 7 determination must be completed in a timely manner upon completion of the project. Emergency water resources projects that are later determined to have a direct and adverse effect on the river values shall be mitigated based on the findings of the Section 7 determination.

Section 10: Management direction

Section 10 sets forth the management direction for designated river segments and includes the following:

1. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act shall be administered to protect and enhance Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Uses that are consistent with this and do not substantially interfere with public enjoyment and use of these values should not be limited (16 USC 1281[a]).
2. In administration of a Wild and Scenic River, “primary emphasis shall be given to protecting its aesthetic, scenic, historic, archeologic, and scientific features. Management plans may establish varying degrees of intensity for its protection and development, based on the special attributes of the area” (16 USC 1281[a]).
3. The act states that Wild and Scenic River segments in the National Wilderness Preservation System are subject to both the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the Wilderness Act. Where the two conflict, the more restrictive regulation will apply (16 USC 1281[b]).
4. Any component of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System that is administered by the National Park Service shall become part of the National Park System. The lands involved shall be subject to the provisions of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the acts under which the National Park System is administered. In the case of conflict between such acts, the more restrictive provisions will apply (16 USC 1281[c]).
5. Section 10(e) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act enables administering federal agencies to enter into cooperative agreements with state and local governments to allow them to participate in the planning and administration of components of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System that include or adjoin state- or county-owned lands.

Section 12: Management policies

The National Park Service shall take management actions on lands under its jurisdiction adjacent to the designated river corridor that may be necessary to protect the river according to the purposes of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The National Park Service shall also work with states, other federal agencies, and entities with jurisdictions adjacent to the Wild and Scenic River corridor to ensure compliance with purposes under the act, particularly in regard to activities, such as timber harvesting and road construction, which may occur outside of the corridor but affect the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

The majority of lands adjacent to the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Some segments abut lands under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management. The National Park Service is working cooperatively with both agencies to ensure the protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

Significant Events

In January 1997, a major flood caused extensive damage to human-made structures along the main stem of the Merced River. Many facilities in Yosemite Valley were flooded, including Lower River, Upper River, Lower Pines, North Pines, and Group Camp-grounds; motel and cabin units at Yosemite Lodge; numerous trail and road bridges; and employee housing areas (NPS 1997b).



NPS Photo by Steve Thompson

HIGH WATER

Four times in the last century the Merced River has risen above its banks to an extent similar to that of January 1997.

The El Portal Road and the main sewer line (under the road) connecting Yosemite Valley to the El Portal Wastewater Treatment

Plant also sustained significant damage and required repair and rebuilding. Sections of the road collapsed as the river undercut rock slopes below the road; other segments were completely washed out (NPS 1997c). The National Park Service took this rebuilding process as an opportunity to upgrade and widen the road, which was historically unsafe for travel, and particularly dangerous for bus travel.

A lawsuit was brought against the National Park Service over the adequacy of the environmental assessment for the reconstruction of the El Portal Road. At the time of the road reconstruction, a comprehensive management plan for the National Park Service segment of the Merced Wild and Scenic River had been initiated, but not completed. The U.S. District Court determined that the absence of a river management plan hindered the National Park Service's ability to ensure that projects in the river corridor adequately protect the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The legal decision for the lawsuit required the National Park Service to complete a comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River with August 2000 as the target date for completion.

About this Document

This *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* (referred to hereafter as the *Merced River Plan*) presents the plan for the river as adopted by the National Park Service following the release of the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* and the Revised Record of Decision. The intent of this document is to outline how the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor will be managed, provide a streamlined reference for park management, staff, and outside agencies to determine when proposed projects must consider Wild and Scenic River issues, and how these issues should be addressed. While it does not repeat the environmental analyses of the *Merced River Plan/FEIS*, this document provides the full management plan adopted by the Record of Decision in August 2000, and as revised in November 2000 (see Appendix A of this document).

The *Merced River Plan/FEIS* includes consideration of a range of five alternatives, environmental impact analyses for each of the alternatives, and extensive public involvement. The full, three-volume document provides information on the existing conditions of the Merced River and surroundings, including natural resources, cultural resources, visitor experience, and social resources.

The *Merced River Plan* was developed using the best data available at the time the plan was drafted, including nearly 100 years of study and observation of river processes. The National Park Service's vision for the *Merced River Plan* is that of a living document,

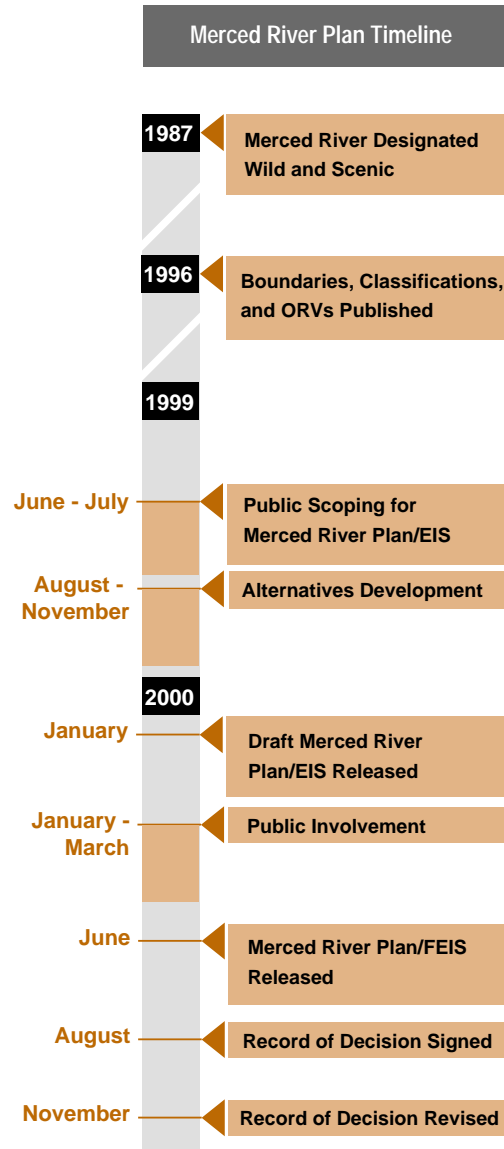
allowing for the continued incorporation of new data. The management elements of the plan have been crafted to allow for this incorporation of new information, such as that relating to floodplains, ordinary high water mark river channel dynamics, or visitor use data. This will enable National Park Service managers to maintain appropriate protection of river-related resources and to allow for appropriate visitor uses within and near the river corridor.



Planning Process

Over 100 years of research and observation have gone into the creation of this *Merced River Plan*. However, an especially concentrated body of work has been ongoing since the Merced was designated as a Wild and Scenic River in 1987, including the ground-work and preparation for this document. All of these efforts – combined with extensive public involvement – make for a comprehensive management plan that is in accordance with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Congress designated 122 miles of the Merced River as a Wild and Scenic River in 1987 (Public Law 100-149). In 1989, the National Park Service adopted interim Wild and Scenic River boundaries and classifications for the 81 miles of river within its jurisdiction. In 1993, 1995, and 1996, the National Park Service conducted three internal river management planning workshops to study the Merced's Wild and Scenic River boundaries, classifications, and Outstandingly Remarkable Values, and to develop Merced River management and restoration strategies. These workshops were conducted in association with general land-use planning for the 1996 *Draft Yosemite Valley Housing Plan/Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement Addendum*. Subsequent to public scoping and public comment, boundaries, classifications, and Outstandingly Remarkable Values for the Merced Wild and Scenic River within Yosemite National Park were published in the 1996 *Draft Yosemite Valley Housing Plan*.





American Dipper or
Water Ouzel
Cinclus mexicanus

The most wonderful singer of all the birds is the water-ouzel that dives into foaming rapids and feeds at the bottom, holding on in a wonderful way, living a charmed life.

*John Muir, 1912
from his book *The Yosemite**

In early 1999, the National Park Service initiated efforts to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the National Park Service segment of the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor, building from those boundaries, classifications, and Outstandingly Remarkable Values developed in 1996. An interdisciplinary team was assembled, consisting of park staff with experience in park planning as well as

expertise in technical areas addressed by the plan (including natural and cultural resources, facilities management, interpretation, visitor protection, and concessions management).

Public scoping was held between June 11 and July 30, 1999 to solicit comments on issues to be addressed in the *Merced River Plan*. The scoping process was conducted in consultation with affected federal agencies, state and local governments, tribal groups, and interested organizations and individuals. All comments received during the scoping process were duly considered and part of the administrative record. For example, the National Park Service updated and refined the boundaries, classifications, and Outstanding Remarkable Values based on these public scoping comments and new information. In July 1999, the decision resulting from a lawsuit over the reconstruction of the El Portal Road directed the National Park Service to complete a comprehensive management plan by August 2000.

In August 1999, the National Park Service published a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement in the *Federal Register*. The *Draft Merced River Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* was prepared by the National Park Service pursuant to the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, and was released in January 2000.

The final plan and environmental impact statement was developed after analysis and consideration of over 2,500 comments submitted during the public involvement period from January 14 to March 24, 2000. The National Park Service received a range of valuable comments from individuals throughout the nation, local residents, long-time Yosemite visitors, government agencies, and interested organizations.

The Merced River planning team reviewed and incorporated comments into the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement*, which was released in June 2000. A Record of Decision on the final plan was signed by the National Park Service Pacific West Regional Director on August 9, 2000 and revised in November 2000.

Purpose of and Need for the Project

Purpose of the Merced River Plan

The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act establishes that a comprehensive management plan must be developed to protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for those rivers that have been designated as wild and scenic (16 USC 1274[d]). The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act specifies the issues to be addressed by a comprehensive management plan, including resource protection, development of lands and facilities, and user capacities. The *Merced River Plan* provides direction on these issues for the 81 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service.

The 1987 federal legislation that designated the Merced River as a Wild and Scenic River states that a management plan “shall assure that no development or use of park lands shall be undertaken that is inconsistent with the designation of such river segments” (16 USC 1274[a]). Furthermore, the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act states, “Management plans for any such component may establish varying degrees of intensity for its protection and development, based on the special attributes of the area” (16 USC 1281[a]). The segments of the river managed by the National Park Service include designated Wilderness and the El Portal Administrative Site. The *Merced River Plan* is designed to address the special characteristics of these areas within the overall context of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The specific purpose of the *Merced River Plan* is to provide direction and guidance on how best to manage visitor use, development of lands and facilities, and resource protection within the river corridor. The National Park Service developed a series of planning goals to guide management decision-making in these areas (see page 25). The *Merced River Plan* is a template against which project implementation plans will be judged to determine whether such projects will protect and enhance the values for which the Merced River was designated Wild and Scenic. As a result, the *Merced River Plan* provides general direction and guidance for future management decisions; it does not address the specific details of future projects.



WHY IS FREE FLOW IMPORTANT TO A RIVER SYSTEM?

- *Free-flowing rivers disperse valuable nutrients in adjacent meadows and stream habitats during flood events.*
- *Aquatic species require varied habitat created by a dynamic river system.*
- *Constriction and hardening of river channels, as caused by levees, riprap, and bridges, can alter the river's energy and natural course, causing it to erode its banks and damage valuable habitat, particularly during flood events.*

Need for the Merced River Plan

By designating the Merced a Wild and Scenic River, Congress directed the National Park Service, as well as the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, to develop comprehensive management plans for the river segments under their jurisdictions. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have completed plans for their river segments. The National Park Service fulfilled its requirement to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the Merced River corridor when the Record of Decision on the final plan was signed by the National Park Service Pacific West Regional Director on August 9, 2000, and revised in November 2000.

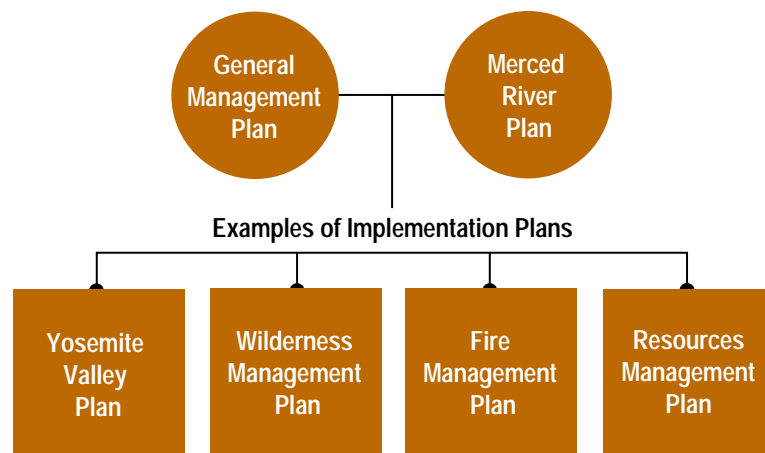
The alternative selected by the National Park Service in the revised Record of Decision meets important resource protection goals while also allowing for appropriate levels and types of visitor use within the river corridor. In reaching its decision on the final *Merced River Plan*, the National Park Service considered the multiple laws and policies that apply to lands within the river corridor, such as the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the National Park Service Organic Act, the Wilderness Act, the legislation establishing the El Portal Administrative Site, and the park's *General Management Plan*. The National Park Service also carefully considered the substantial body of public comments received during the planning process.

Planning Context

The *Merced River Plan* guides the long-term management of the Merced Wild and Scenic River within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park and the El Portal Administrative Site. However, the plan does not exist in a vacuum—it is one of many documents that together form a management framework for Yosemite National Park and adjacent lands. This section describes the role of the *Merced River Plan* within the existing parkwide and regional planning framework and its relationship to other plans and legislation.

Relationship to Yosemite National Park Plans

Planning in Yosemite National Park takes two different forms: general management planning and implementation planning. General management plans are required for national parks by the National Park and Recreation Act of 1978.



The purpose of a general management plan is to set a “clearly defined direction for resource preservation and visitor use” (NPS 1998). The plan provides general direction and policies to guide all planning and management in the park. The 1980 *General Management Plan* is the overall guiding document for planning in Yosemite National Park.

Implementation plans, which tier off of the *General Management Plan*, focus on “how to implement an activity or project needed to achieve a long-term goal” (NPS 1998). Implementation plans may direct specific projects as well as ongoing management activities or programs, and provide a high level of detail and analysis. Examples of

implementation plans include the *Yosemite Valley Plan*, *Wilderness Management Plan*, *Fire Management Plan*, and *Resources Management Plan*.

The *Merced River Plan* derives its authority from the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as amended, and therefore does not tier directly off the *General Management Plan* as do implementation plans. According to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the river management plan “shall be coordinated with and may be incorporated into resource management planning for affected adjacent Federal lands” (16 USC 1274). In designating the Merced as a Wild and Scenic River, Congress authorized the National Park Service to prepare its management plan for the river by making appropriate revisions to the park’s 1980 *General Management Plan* (16 USC 1274[a][62]). The management elements of the *Merced River Plan* (see page 29) result in some revisions to the *General Management Plan*. For example, the *Merced River Plan’s* management zoning, River Protection Overlay, river corridor boundaries and classifications, and the Outstandingly Remarkable Values would amend the *General Management Plan* by establishing additional land-use designations that would be considered in future site-specific planning. The *Merced River Plan’s* Section 7 determination process and Visitor Experience and Resource Protection program are tools that would augment the goals of the *General Management Plan*. Although the *Merced River Plan* amends the *General Management Plan* in certain respects, other aspects, including its five broad goals (see pages 23-24), remain unaffected. Implementation plans and actions affecting the Merced Wild and Scenic River will need to be consistent with these goals and the management elements contained in the *Merced River Plan*.

Relationship to Other Plans

The National Park Service’s *Merced River Plan* is one of three plans that manage the designated 122 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management administer 41 miles of the main stem and South Fork of the Merced River as it travels through their jurisdictions downstream of the National Park Service segments. The Bureau of Land Management segments are managed under the 1991 *Merced Wild and Scenic River Management Plan* and the U.S. Forest Service segments are managed under the *South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic River Implementation Plan*, also completed in 1991. While the National Park Service, U.S.

Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management plans address different geographic areas, they all must protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of each segment of the Merced River corridor under the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The 1991 *Wawona Town Planning Area Specific Plan* guides land uses in the town of Wawona, including a segment of the South Fork of the Merced River. This plan is jointly approved by the National Park Service and Mariposa County and is a component of the *Mariposa County General Plan*. It is administered by the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors. The *Merced River Plan* does not prescribe management activities for privately held lands (which occupy approximately one-third of Section 35 in Wawona), and the National Park Service does not exercise direct land-use authority over private lands. It is the intent of the National Park Service to work cooperatively with Mariposa County and with private property owners to ensure that the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the river segment are protected and enhanced. The National Park Service will also continue in a collaborative planning process for the community of Wawona with the Wawona Town Planning Advisory Committee, the Mariposa County Planning Commission, and the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors. The *Wawona Town Plan* is generally consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. For example, the *Wawona Town Plan* prohibits new development within the Floodplain District Zone.

As new planning efforts are undertaken by Mariposa County or other agencies, the National Park Service will continue to work cooperatively with these agencies to protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the river.

Legal Framework

The *Merced River Plan* operates within a complex legal framework. The plan must not only comply with requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, it must do so within the parameters of other legislation that govern land use within the river corridor.²

National Park Service Organic Act

In 1916, the National Park Service Organic Act established the National Park Service in order to “promote and regulate the use of parks...” and defined the purpose of the national parks as “to conserve the scenery and natural and historic objects and wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” This law provides overall guidance for the management of Yosemite National Park.

Yosemite National Park Enabling Legislation

Three separate legislative acts form the enabling statutes for the current Yosemite National Park. On June 30, 1864, Congress granted to the State of California the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to “be held for public use, resort, and recreation.” On October 1, 1890, Congress set aside Yosemite National Park as a “forest reservation” to preserve the “curiosities” and “wonders” in their natural condition. In 1906, the State of California granted the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees and Yosemite Valley back to the federal government.

Wilderness Act

A large segment of the Merced Wild and Scenic River flows through designated Wilderness areas. The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the California Wilderness Act of 1984 provide guidance for management within designated Wilderness. The purpose of the Wilderness Act of 1964 is to secure the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness for present and future generations. Wilderness is defined in the act as an area managed to preserve its natural conditions, which is affected primarily by the forces of nature, and which has outstanding opportunities for solitude and an unconfined type of recreation

² Appendix A of the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (Merced River Plan/FEIS)* includes excerpts from the National Park Service Organic Act, California Wilderness Act of 1984, El Portal Administrative Site Authorization Act, and the El Portal Administrative Land Exchange Authorization.

(Public Law 88-577). These goals complement the intent of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as it applies to the areas of the Merced River corridor classified as Wild. The California Wilderness Act established 704,624 acres of designated Wilderness and 927 acres of potential Wilderness additions within Yosemite National Park (NPS 1989). Most of the Merced River in Yosemite National Park flows through designated Wilderness areas, which are managed under the 1989 Wilderness Management Plan. The *Merced River Plan's* management approach to Wilderness is consistent with the *Wilderness Management Plan*.

El Portal Administrative Site Enabling Legislation

El Portal is a community located outside Yosemite National Park along the park's western boundary. In 1958, Congress passed legislation for the Secretary of the Interior to provide an administrative site for Yosemite National Park in the El Portal area (16 USC 47-1). This land is under National Park Service jurisdiction but is not included as part of Yosemite National Park, and thus is not managed under the Organic Act or the General Authorities Act (72 Stat. 1772). The purpose of this act is to:

...set forth an administrative site in the El Portal area adjacent to Yosemite National Park, in order that utilities, facilities, and services required in the operation and administration of Yosemite National Park may be located on such site outside the park.

The Merced Wild and Scenic River runs through the El Portal Administrative Site. The *Merced River Plan* provides a management framework for the Recreational classified river segment in El Portal that will allow for the protection and enhancement of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of this segment of the river while allowing for varying degrees of continued administrative use in El Portal.

Management Goals

Goals identify long-range direction for the management of the river corridor. This management must carefully balance multiple goals, especially in a park as large, diverse, and complex as Yosemite National Park. The five defining goals of the *General Management Plan* and the five goals of the *Merced River Plan* are intertwined, and no one goal can be emphasized to the complete exclusion of the others. The following section presents the goals from Yosemite's *General Management Plan* and a summary statement for each goal as applied to the *Merced River Plan*. This is followed by a set of goals specifically developed for the *Merced River Plan*.

General Management Plan Goals

The 1980 *General Management Plan* for Yosemite National Park established five broad goals to guide management of the park as a whole and to perpetuate Yosemite's natural splendor. Although the *General Management Plan* is over 20 years old, its goals are still valid today and apply to the management of the Merced River corridor under the *Merced River Plan*.



VALLEY VIEW

The goals of the General Management Plan provide the foundation for decisions relating to all of Yosemite National Park.

Reclaim priceless natural beauty

The Merced Wild and Scenic River is a vital component of Yosemite National Park, a park recognized worldwide for its unique, scenic grandeur. The main stem of the river connects the wilderness to Yosemite Valley, where the river meanders through meadows and woodlands, and continues on a canyon-carving descent through El Portal. The South Fork flows from mountainous wilderness areas through the historic town of Wawona, into foothill canyons, to its confluence with the main stem. The

priceless natural beauty of the river corridor shall be protected and enhanced for today's visitors and future generations.

Allow natural processes to prevail

The natural processes of the Merced River corridor sustain many biological communities, such as meadows, riparian areas, and aquatic habitats. Some processes, such as hydrology, have been altered by historic and current land-use patterns. The Merced River shall be protected and further restored to its free-flowing condition, allowing the natural processes that have shaped the Valley to continue.

Promote visitor understanding and enjoyment

Interpretation and education programs are valuable in enhancing visitor enjoyment and increasing understanding of the natural processes and events that have shaped the park. Interpretive programs also help instill a sense of respect and responsibility for the natural and cultural environment in the park and beyond. Visitors should be encouraged to engage in the resource-based recreational and educational opportunities available along the river.

Markedly reduce traffic congestion

Traffic congestion that occurs in the Merced River corridor can affect some of its Outstandingly Remarkable Values, such as enjoyment of the natural river environment. Providing visitor access to the river while protecting and enhancing the condition of the corridor's natural and cultural resources requires careful planning and design of circulation and transportation facilities. Where applicable, the *Merced River Plan* contributes to reducing traffic congestion by guiding subsequent plans that address road locations and facilities, parking areas, turnouts, and other related issues.

Reduce crowding

The popularity of national parks such as Yosemite continues to grow. During peak visitation periods, crowding can diminish visitors' experiences and may contribute to degradation of resources along the river. Where applicable, the *Merced River Plan* contributes to subsequent planning that will manage crowding through careful design, relocation, or removal of specific facilities, and the *Merced River Plan* will implement the Visitor Experience Resource Protection framework (see page 103) which may set use limits, disperse visitor impacts, and establish other measures to protect both the diversity of visitor experiences and the resources of the river corridor.

Merced River Plan Goals

While the *Merced River Plan* works in concert with the goals set forth in the *General Management Plan*, it also outlines an additional set of specific goals for management of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The *Merced River Plan's* five goals were developed to further the policy established by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, namely to preserve designated rivers in their free-flowing condition, and protect and enhance the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values.



VALLEY VIEW REFLECTION

The Merced River Plan goals reflect those outlined in the General Management Plan, but are also driven by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Protect and enhance river-related natural resources

The Merced River contains diverse biological communities that have experienced varying levels of human disturbance. The natural function of riparian areas, wetlands, and floodplains of the Merced River shall be maintained and restored. Restoration activities shall strive to return habitat to natural levels of complexity and diversity. Water quality shall be maintained at the highest possible levels.

Protect and restore natural hydrological and geomorphic processes

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is intended to preserve the free-flowing condition of designated rivers such as the Merced. The hydrologic processes of the Merced River, including natural flood cycles, channel dynamics, and interconnection of ground and surface water systems, have been altered by historic and current land-use patterns. Restoration and management activities shall redirect visitor use and facilities that are causing unacceptable impacts to the river system.

Protect and enhance river-related cultural resources

The Merced River corridor has been inhabited for thousands of years, and evidence of this history, including historical and archeological sites, remains today. These cultural resources shall be cherished and maintained as important links to the human history of

the Merced River. Archeological, historic, and cultural sites and landscapes are also part of the living tradition of resource stewardship for culturally associated American Indian people.

Provide diverse river-related recreational and educational experiences

The Merced River is a valuable recreational and educational resource for visitors from around the country and the world. The river should provide opportunities for enjoyable and educational experiences within the river's natural and cultural landscapes. People with diverse interests and expectations shall be able to find a broad spectrum of opportunities, from options for solitude and quiet to group activities. Appropriate access to the river shall be provided; recreational facilities shall be designed and sited to ensure protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values and to preserve the free-flowing condition of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

Provide appropriate land uses

To enable the many visitors to the park each year to enjoy and learn about the Merced River's Outstandingly Remarkable Values requires efficient, safe, and appropriate land uses, including both visitor service and administrative facilities. These facilities shall be sited in locations able to withstand high levels of visitor use. Existing and future roads shall be constructed and maintained for safety, while protecting the free flow of the river and its Outstandingly Remarkable Values.